

Ep. 017: About Those Student Evals...

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It's that time of year, when students turn the proverbial tables on their instructors and evaluate us. But student evaluations of our teaching are neither something we should dread, nor something we should read too much into. How do you strike a balance that let's you use those end-of-term feedback surveys as a positive tool for reflection? Claire and Jim explore what you should and shouldn't worry about, the virtue of the "long view," and more.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

CLAIRE: And I'm Claire.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me once again, Dr. Claire Lamonica. Our director, Hi, Claire.

CLAIRE: Hi, Jim.

JIM: Hey, it, we're recording this middle of November.

CLAIRE: Yeah.

JIM: It's going to go out probably in a couple of weeks. And we are in prime time for those end of term evaluations that all of us faculty members are giving our students, so we wanted to talk about that today. You have people come and talk to you about these once in a while, don't you?

CLAIRE: Yeah, not just, not just me. But several of us here at CTLT often hear from faculty, usually in in the bleak midwinter.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: In January or when they're pulling them out and looking at them. And they may and they may feel. Flomax just confused by them, or they may feel concerned about them. And so sometimes they find their way over to talk to us about them.

JIM: So, today, we want to talk a little bit about what, what we should really as, as instructors expect to get out of these, to an extent and an important caveat, as we were talking before we started to record this was your mileage may vary because the these assessments vary across campus. Right?

CLAIRE: Right. Aside from the College of Applied Science and Technology, where they use a standard evaluation form, they use the IDA across the college. Other than that, it's my understanding that each academic department has its own its own evaluation form. So, those vary widely. And they were, you know, devised in wildly different ways.

JIM: But we want to talk a little bit about what, what faculty members should expect to get out of this, what they, what they shouldn't worry about as much that sort of thing, and how to actually use these as positive tools for planning your next round of teaching, as opposed to, as opposed to being something that just kind of gets us down during the week. The bleak winter.

CLAIRE: Feel bad about in January?

JIM: So, just start out in general. Tell us why we do this. Why, why do you have these sort of end of semester evaluations? Why is it a good thing?

CLAIRE: That way, you know, it is a good thing. Good teachers are reflective practitioners. And without course evaluations or student evaluations of teaching, as they're sort of called in the field, we wouldn't have as much to reflect on. It's important to gain a variety of perspectives on our teaching. And we talked about this every time we talk about, you know, assessing our teaching, but one very important perspective to get is our student's perspective. And this is one way of getting that information.

JIM: And, and I think the key word there is you emphasize his perspective, because it is an important view. It's how the students are kind of framed, or how they are framing their, what they see going on in the course. But we have to understand it is also from their perspective. So, as we read these results, we have to realize we have to we have to kind of be in their shoes a little bit too.

CLAIRE: And then that's valid, I think, you know, our students, our students are our primary audience. That's true. They're who were teaching. Yeah. So, if we want to know how we're doing it our job, it's really nice if we consult our primary audience and ask them, hey, how am I doing? That? It's really the only thing that makes sense. You know, if your car mechanic wanted to know whether he'd done a good job fixing your car, he'd probably have to ask you. That's why usually sometimes get a follow up survey from your car mechanics.

JIM: Beyond the basic, threshold of you know, did you survive the car trip home and...

CLAIRE: Right, did a car make it home? Right? Yeah, that's a good metric.

JIM: Yeah, my class just filled out its evaluation. Last night. I actually was in another instructor's class last night, delivering the ...

CLAIRE: Because your department trades off.

JIM: My department trades off and so and I'm holding, people can't see...

CLAIRE: The very little stubby pen... pencil...

JIM: I'm holding. I'm holding my commemorative end of semester evaluation.

CLAIRE: Pencil.

JIM: Yeah, golf pencil or whatever you call these things. These's fiendish little things.

CLAIRE: I have to tell you; I don't want to get into politics. But I have to tell you that after a lifetime in academics, I am so ingrained that you have to use a number two pencil that when they gave me a marker to vote with, I was really just I thought, Wait, is this going to count?

JIM: This isn't going to work.

CLAIRE: Don't I need a number two, pencil? Whatever that's an aside, you can cut it if you want to.

JIM: Well, it causes a lot of anxiety for me, because you know, numbers make my eyeballs roll back. No, no, I want to keep that in because I actually think that there's something I want to come back to towards the end, which is talking about how students approach these evaluations and how that affects what we see in terms of the numbers. But okay, and speaking of numbers, so I, my when I first started to get these when I came to teach at Illinois State because we did them a little differently at my previous institution. And I didn't actually see them all the time. So, it was great that I was getting every semester, all of a sudden, I got an email and it had, here's, here's what they had to say. And I'm looking at a bunch of numbers. And I, you know, I took statistics, I know what numbers are for and how they work. I don't always have as much faith that they're describing the universe, precisely. But it's a comparison, I get at least a breakdown of how they rated me how they rated all of the other 200 or 300 level courses that are taught in the department and, and how they read all this other stuff. So, there, there are a lot of these numbers. And I think that that causes some anxiety for us, when we read these. Right.

CLAIRE: Um, so it's I think they're probably differing levels of anxiety caused by numbers. I mean, I think probably people whose you know, for whom not numbers as their stock and trade are maybe not as flummoxed.

JIM: More sanguine about the whole thing.

CLAIRE: Right, right. And they also know that frequently, with a course you're dealing with very small, and you know, you've got 20, 25 in a seminar course, maybe you have 12. I mean, you have a really small number of people being asked these questions. So, it's, it's hard to take too much out of it. On the other end, you know, you may be if you're teaching a class of, you know, three 400 students, you have a really large "n", but you also have sort of the confounding factor of well, this is a class with three or 400 students. So, the core, the questions that seem applicable to a class of 25 may not be applicable to a class of three or 400. So, it's an important tool, but it's an imperfect tool.

JIM: So, when faculty members come to you, and they bring these numbers, they bring these results. What are they saying to you? And, and what are you saying to them?

CLAIRE: Yeah, well, usually, if they come to us here at CTLT, and again, it's not just me, but when they when they come to, to me or my colleagues here at CTLT, usually, it's

because they're worried about something. And usually, it's because they're worried because, oh, they got a list. And they found out that, you know, their class was in the bottom quadrant of all 200 level courses being taught, or worse, yet they were in the bottom quadrant of everybody teaching in their department or, you know, some, some really worrying kind of thing like that. And so usually, they want to know, well, their big question is always, how could I do better? How can I? How can I get higher numbers?

JIM: Well, okay.

CLAIRE: But, um, but yeah, I think there is a real concern, you know, people here really care about their teaching, I have great confidence in that. And I'm pretty certain that anybody listening to this podcast really cares about their teaching.

JIM: Absolutely. Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, you know, I think the, the goal really is to get to be a better teacher. And in that case, you have to, I think, avoid giving too much credence to one set of numbers, any one set of numbers. So, what I really encourage people to do is to look at these assessment results, to look for trends, and to look for trends across courses in any given semester, and across semesters in any given course. So, you know, one set of evaluations from one class can tell you something about that snapshot of your teaching that one course with that one set of students in that one semester, but every semester is different, every set of students is different. Our courses are almost always different. We always, always tweak something before we teach them again. So, it really is just a snapshot, I think the most important takeaways are the ones that we can glean from looking at trends.

JIM: Yeah. And I and I've benefited from that personally, one of the questions is asked in the School of Communication is essentially, you know, how, you know, a Likert type scale. So, you know, agree, strongly agree, agree, disagree quitter. My instructor returns work quickly, or in a timely manner and appropriately, you know, an appropriate length of time. And I you know; I had always struggled with that. And for the longest time I struggled with that I still occasionally do. But I'm better at communicating when I'm not going to return stuff when I set down. Yeah. But, but that was something that I learned over time. It's like, this wasn't just a fluke. This is a pattern I'm starting to see. So, it's looking for patterns,

CLAIRE: Right. It's looking for patterns. I you know, I frequently tell the story people many people have already heard it about the first time that a student said on one of my course evaluations, she plays favorites. I wrote that off. And that was in the, you know, in the quantity, the qualitative comments, right, the quantitative but a semester later when a different student said the same thing. In the same course I thought, huh, that's funny. Somebody said that last semester. You know, the third time I heard it, I really had to start taking it seriously. And I had to figure out what it was I was doing. That either was, you know, Was I playing favorites? I mean, I had to ask myself that question. And if I wasn't what was I doing that gave that perception? So...

JIM: Yeah. because in and a lot, at least the assessments I get, the student evaluations include an open question sort of thing, that more qualitative sort of feedback. But regardless, we have to think about what why are the students drawing that conclusion?

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: It may not be that what they're saying is actually true. But they think that's what it is. So, why are they thinking this way?

CLAIRE: Right.

JIM: And that's part of the reflection process for us as teachers, right?

CLAIRE: Right, because they don't often include that it would have been very helpful to me if the first student had said, she plays favorites. I could tell because she spends, you know, more time talking to this student about his writing than she spends talking to me about my writing.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: So, you know, if that if I had been given that information, the first time I saw that comment, it would have been very, very helpful.

JIM: Right. Right. But the thing you didn't do, it sounds like is what I even found myself doing. And I have talked to some faculty members who kind of there's an initial reaction to this feedback, where it's like, yeah, but they don't know that I do this work. And they don't know that that you know, and they try to create the counter argument. Because it because feedback is, can be tough sometimes.

CLAIRE: Sure, absolutely. You know, and our students are not, they are not good at providing diplomatic or sometimes even constructive feedback, they're not good at providing constructive feedback in a diplomatic way. They just put it out there. And you know, part of that, part of that is, is part of that is on us. Sure, we're asking students to think you value evaluatively, without some time, sometimes that's the only time we're asking them to think you evaluatively in our class. And, you know, that's not a good thing.

JIM: No, that's true

CLAIRE: Providing constructive feedback in a diplomatic fashion is something that takes practice. And our students sometimes don't know how to do that, sometimes they just can't be bothered. And, and often, they don't provide any, you know, they fill in the numbers, they fill in the bubbles. And then that's, that's all we get, we only get the numbers. Well, and I this what I what I wanted to kind of come back to what I wanted to kind of come back to, which was I also get a sense, you know, so last night, I walked into this class, and I had with for another instructor, and I said, hi, I'm here to do the evaluation. And there was kind of this universal. So, it's like, oh, we're doing this again.

JIM: Really, so I think there is some, in some cases there, there may be a little bit of evaluation fatigue, I don't know what you do about it. I guess you don't do anything about it. But you may need to recognize it a little bit.

CLAIRE: Yeah, I think it's important for students to, to understand that faculty really do use those evaluations. When I go out to give midterm chats, I talk a little bit about how the chat as an alternative to the or as a supplement to the end of semester evaluation. And I try not to pose it as an alternative. And I always make the point that instructors here at Illinois State, for the most part, do look at those evaluations, they do take them seriously. And they do make changes to their teaching, or their courses based on the their findings from the evaluations. So, I think a lot of times students just think, this is just a waste of time. Nobody ever looks at the

JIM: It's a little bread and circuses.

CLAIRE: Yeah, you know, blah, blah, blah, it's just they perceive it as busy work.

JIM: Right.

CLAIRE: And if there's not any counter narrative, then why should they change their mind?

JIM: Yeah, well, and then we would hope then that if that counter narrative can be presented, that we'll get more accurate data, and we'll get more useful data out of this. I mean, you're always going to have, I always have one student who just marks all the ones, whatever, you know, just someone who, you know, I actually shouldn't say I always have that, but I often see that and it may be that they are truly dis-encharmed with the course and my teaching, it could very well be that and I always think about that. Or they, may be disencharmed with the process. That's the other part of it.

CLAIRE: Whatever. I mean, you just, you don't, you know, you have to watch for the trend. Yes, there are several students marking all ones or fives or whatever. And that's, you know, that's another thing is that students our poor students, you know, every course they go in and there's an if the course is in a different department, it's a different instrument. And sometimes ones are good. And sometimes ones are bad.

JIM: Yeah.

CLAIRE: And they, you know, unless they're reading very carefully, you know, because I have had people bring me evaluations where they're given all lowest marks in the, in the qualitative part, the quantitative part, sorry, get those confused. And then there are these glowing comments in, you know, in the other part, the open-ended parts.

JIM: So, the students didn't read the instructions,

CLAIRE: they didn't read the instructions carefully, you know,

JIM: and, of course, in some instruments, in fact, you know, you know, in a good instrument, there should be a few of those Likert type questions where it is reversed.

So, you're checking to see if they're, they're actually paying attention or not, but if it's but you know, I always thought five was always great. And then one was already.

CLAIRE: Not necessarily,

JIM: Not necessarily Now interesting. So, what advice What other advice do you give to faculty members when they come? And they talk about when they just say, I don't know what to do with these numbers?

CLAIRE: Yeah. Well, you know, I tell people, let's crunch them, you know, you need to crunch the numbers don't try to take much away from just the raw data. And so, we, you know, we spend a little time crunching numbers, we look for averages, and, you know, if, if I'm feeling really geeky, I might talk about statistical, things like that. But I'm so rarely feeling that geeky, you know, anybody who wants to talk about things like that should probably see, Julie Ann, she's really good at that stuff. But we tend to look, you know, we look at averages, and across the class, and which a lot of times that's already been figured. And then, you know, we kind of talked about, well, you know, that's, it's not as bad as it looks, you know, more of these are, you know, on the high side than or on the low side. But and I also encourage people to not, this is really hard, because we all do this, to not beat themselves up about the one student who gave them lowest marks on everything. Because, you know, there is so often that one student.

JIM: Yeah, like I said, yeah.

CLAIRE: Yeah. And I just, you know, I feel like, in most classes, I'm going to have somebody who thinks I walk on water, and somebody who thinks I am the devil's spawn. And I really try to throw out both of those. But, but, you know, I beat myself, I'm like, everybody else, I beat myself up over about over that I spend so much time concentrating on that one really negative one, that it's hard for me to get past. So, you know, I really encourage people to get past that, you know, let's talk about this body of information outside of this outlier, or, you know, outliers in each direction, or whatever. So, I think that's the other probably most frequently given, you know, given piece of advice from Aunt Claire or whatever.

JIM: Maybe it would be good today to kind of end on that wider perspective. You know, you and I, we talked about doing the, the episode, and we haven't yet about why we both became teachers. Yeah. But part of that is that, you know, teaching is a very personal profession, in that, I mean, you really have to have your identity, I am a teacher in order to do this, I think I mean, there are people who come from industry and whatnot. And, and I was certainly one of those, I came from a from a profession, and I came back to teach in that, in that discipline, there's a flip side, which is not to take teaching, it's a personal endeavor, but don't take it too personal, personally, all the time. In other words, you have to have a little bit, you have to be able to take a step back. And be not just reflective, but also objective about what you're doing.

CLAIRE: Right. And I think being reflective can help you with that, you know, in the broader scheme of things, you know, this is this, this set of evaluations is one snapshot. It's a snapshot and how am I developing overall, as a teacher? Am I Am I making progress overall, in the big scheme of things, you know, are all things working toward good, you

know, and, and that's, that's what we're aiming at. So, I think, you know, trying to find a takeaway, you know, and you also you can't address every issue, you just can't do that. You can't, you can't...

JIM: No, and I think it's so it's important not to make wholesale change every time you get an evaluation, because you're never going to I mean.

CLAIRE: Right, because snapshot, it was one class. Yes, you know, and your students next semester may love that assignment that your students this semester hated. So, you know, yeah, you can't just reinvent yourself as an instructor in response to every set of course evaluations. You have to have a sense of yourself and be moving in a sense of your best self and be and be moving towards that.

JIM: Well, I think achieving a best sense of our best self is always a good goal. So, I think that's also a good way to end today's episode. So, Claire, thank you so much.

CLAIRE: Thank you.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this week's episode of Let's Talk Teaching. You can find out more about the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, and our podcasts by going to CTLT.IllinoisState.edu. You can find past episodes and learn how to subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. For Claire Lamonica and everyone here at the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, Happy Teaching!